

Arab Press Fans The Flames of Hate

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

The government-controlled media across the Muslim world consistently print stories with an anti-American slant, and the United States so far has failed to counter.

Try these for fighting words: “Rumsfeld is a new Hitler” and “Cheney, Rice and Rumsfeld are the Axis of Evil” and “Powell is even more stupid and deceitful than Mrs. Madeleine Albright.” And they don’t come from French anti-war protesters or San Francisco fringe groups, but from the pages of two of the top government-run newspapers in U.S.-allied Egypt.

With the State Department signing off every year on American taxpayers’ annual \$2 billion subsidy to the Egyptian government, the average citizen might think someone in Washington would be leaning on Cairo to stop inciting anti-U.S. hatred through the regime’s mouthpieces. That citizen would be wrong. The controlled media in Egypt and across the Arab/Muslim world have loaded both their editorials and news sections with vitriol against the United States, providing legitimacy and political cover for ever-intensifying extremism.

That was the case well before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. Just weeks after newly inaugurated President George W. Bush appointed Colin Powell as the country’s top diplomat, a writer in the government daily *Al-Akhbar* wrote, “The American secretary of state shed his skin, tore himself from his roots, and today he represents only himself and has no connection to the Black American community which led the revolution for democracy, equality and human rights in the world.”

Bush administration officials say the United States has not leveraged its relationship with the Egyptian government — and other Arab or predominantly Muslim states with similar press restric-

tions — to prevent such officially sponsored, and arguably American-subsidized, statements from adding credibility to the propaganda of the terrorists and their state sponsors. That failure is damaging to U.S. interests, the officials say. Their view is reinforced by a major new survey of 16,000 people in 20 countries released June 3 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project.

“The bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world,” according to the Pew report. “Negative views of the U.S. among Muslims, which had been largely limited to countries in the Middle East, have spread to Muslim populations in Indonesia and Nigeria. Since last summer, favorable ratings for the U.S. have fallen from 61 percent to 15 percent in Indonesia and from 71 percent to 38 percent among Muslims in Nigeria.

“In the wake of the war, a growing percentage of Muslims see serious threats to Islam. Specifically, majorities in seven of eight Muslim populations surveyed express worries that the United States might become a military threat to their countries. Even in Kuwait, where people have a generally favorable view of the United States, 53 percent voice at least some concern that the U.S. could someday pose a threat.

“Support for the U.S.-led war on terrorism also has fallen in most Muslim publics. Equally significant, solid majorities in the Palestinian Authority, Indonesia and Jordan — and nearly half of those in Morocco and Pakistan — say they have at least some confidence in Osama bin Laden to ‘do the right thing regarding world affairs.’ Fully 71 percent of Palestinians say they have confidence in bin Laden in this regard.”

The news and information outlets of those countries, most of which are state-dominated or government-controlled, have fueled anti-American fury, with no strategic attempts on the U.S. side to counter the constant negative messages. Surveys of the Arabic-language media, especially outlets controlled or censored by governments supported or defended by the United States, show just how destructive key Arab governments have been in Washington’s all-but-vain efforts to counter terrorist propaganda.

Americans would know little if anything about how “moderate” Arab regimes are whipping up hostile public opinion were it not for a small, Washington-based foundation called the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), which has earned widespread respect for its world-class translations from Arabic into English. With little or no editorial comment, MEMRI publishes the translations in English for public use.

MEMRI’s collection of translations and quotes shows that for at least three years *Al-Ahram* and other Egyptian government newspapers have spread lie after lie about the United States, accusing it of “committing a crime against humanity by giving the Afghani people hazardous humanitarian products” such as genetically altered grain. *Al-Ilm*, a government-sanctioned science magazine, wrote of “alleged U.S. germ warfare in Afghanistan” and recycled old Soviet disinformation about American biological warfare against North Korea. *Al-Ahram* ran a column on Jan. 26, 2002, saying that U.S. treatment of captured al-Qaeda terrorists was “unseen in history — worse than what Hitler did.” The paper’s Website published a piece the following March that said, “What we have here is not an axis of evil under attack; rather, what we have is an axis of evil in the making.” Earlier this year, *Al-Ahram*’s weekly edition carried a piece comparing the Bush administration’s policy-making to “the manner in which Hitler manipulated the German people to adopt the agenda of the Nazi Party.”

The Saudi Arabian press, which is subject to severe censorship (and therefore, frustrated administration officials say, subject to as-yet nonexistent U.S. pressure), compares President George W. Bush to Adolf Hitler and the Roman emperor Caligula, and calls the global war on terrorism “an evil crusade against Muslims everywhere.” Meanwhile, Saudi media glorify terrorism in the name of jihad worldwide. The state-owned TV1 channel, which like the rest of the Saudi media is tightly controlled by political and religious police, broadcasts the sermons of government-en-



Turn the page: Egyptian government newspapers have printed lie after lie about the United States.

PHOTO: JAMALI/AP/WIDEWORLD

dorsed Wahhabi clerics who call for the destruction not only of Israel and Jews, but of Christians and other “infidels” all around the world.

The State Department has been loath to call the Saudis on this, literally giving the regime a free ride to whip up the population, especially younger people, against the United States. That has even some Saudi observers concerned. Columnist Abdullah Abu Sameh recently commented in the Saudi daily *Okaz* that “extremist groups” took disaffected Arab youths and “stuffed their minds with a fanatic ideology and a faulty interpretation of jihad.” He wrote:

“These misguided youth were made to believe in the ideology of dividing society into believers and nonbelievers, and hold that every other idea amounted to apostasy. They were taught not to accept any other viewpoint other than [the one] held by their own group, and that the whole world is full of infidels and heretics.”

According to Sameh, whose column was translated by MEMRI, “The extremists have inculcated brutality, violence and killing into the minds of their followers, who blindly and thoughtlessly go on fighting without assessing the real power of their enemy.” The terrorists,

wrote Sameh, “have spread confusion and instability in the society that needs cohesion and stability at this time.”

Such teachings have spread to the highest and most prestigious Islamic authorities in many places. Reporting from Cairo last year, *INSIGHT* senior writer Kenneth R. Timmerman found that Egypt’s highest religious authority, Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb, regards Islamist terrorism as obedience to God and justifies any action against anyone who offends Islam [see “Top Egyptian Cleric Justifies Terrorism,” Nov. 26-Dec. 9].

While the State Department has not held Saudi, Egyptian and other Arab authorities responsible for spreading hate and extremism in their controlled media and through political appointees, NBC’s Tim Russert has done so in his elegant, no-nonsense style. In a recent *Meet the Press* program, Russert grilled Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah’s normally unflappable English-speaking foreign-policy counsel, Abdel al-Jubeir. Russert held the Saudi regime responsible for its state-sponsored clerics, for the terrorist war against the United States, for anti-Western vitriol in controlled news services and even in children’s schoolbooks, and for continued funding of philan-

thropic causes that serve as fronts for terrorist bombers. Faced with such a strong presentation of facts, al-Jubeir quit waffling and pledged that his government would end the practices.

Now, administration officials tell *INSIGHT*, it’s up to the State Department to make sure that the Saudis follow through.

Meanwhile, other Saudi officials also claim that the regime will clean up its act. The Saudi Embassy in Washington hastily issued a response to a MEMRI report connecting extremist teachings in the Saudi educational system to the young Saudi men who hijacked the Sept. 11 jetliners. The response, purporting to be from Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, stated, “There is no room in our schools for hatred, for intolerance or for anti-Western thinking.” It added, “A program is now in place to eliminate such material from schools.”

Or is it? As MEMRI Executive Director Steven Stalinsky points out, official Saudi acknowledgement of extremism in its educational system appears to be issued in English for the benefit of foreign audiences, while official statements in Arabic strongly defend the curriculum.

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